



## Burning Down the House

Rachel Mackintosh © 21 August 2022

Burning Down the House was part of the soundtrack of my adolescence.

The song came out two years after the 1981 Springbok tour of New Zealand that had united a nationwide protest movement from across the political and socio-economic spectrum, where tens of thousands of us had marched together periodically in the year leading up to the tour, and twice a week from 19 July — my mother's birthday and the day our family went to the airport at dawn to protest the Springboks' arrival — to 12 September — the fourth anniversary of Steve Biko's death from severe beating in custody and the date of the final test match of the tour. The second match — against the Waikato provincial team on 25 July — was called off after protesters invaded the pitch. Apart from that one match, the tour went ahead. The movement didn't achieve its aim of stopping the tour.

The introduction to the subject of the tour on the NZ History website has the subheading, "A country divided".

Over the next 40 years, many things happened. Nelson Mandela went from being an imprisoned "terrorist" on Robben Island in South Africa to being the joint winner with FW de Klerk of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize for their work ending apartheid. Mandela became President of post-apartheid South Africa in 1994, and in 1995 he visited New Zealand. Protest leader John Minto remembers the visit: "One of the things he said was that when he was in prison in 1981 and they heard that the game had been stopped by protest, all the prisoners rattled their doors throughout the jail and he said it was like the sun came out."

In 2018 Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern addressed the Nelson Mandela Peace Summit at the United Nations in New York and spoke about New Zealand having stood in solidarity with the black South African population during the 1981 tour. In 2019 there was a Nelson Mandela exhibition at Eden Park, where representatives of the Rugby Union spoke proudly about New Zealand's stand against apartheid in 1981.

In 2022 it is common for those of us who protested to speak fondly of our times standing up for the end of a racist regime in South Africa. It is much less common to find people who were pro-tour in 1981 fondly reminiscing about the stand they took to keep politics out of sport.

The “country divided” is slowly rewriting our history. Our story now is much more often that we supported the end of apartheid. We marched peacefully in the streets. Nelson Mandela thanked us. We talk much less about the radical elements that undertook a deliberate programme of civil disobedience in order to get arrested and clog the court system and put pressure on the government to call the tour off.

For me personally, I loved the protest movement. I felt a sense of righteous rage at the South African regime. I was thrilled to march alongside trade unionists and Maori radicals and teenage punks and middle class teachers and public servants and university students. The coolest to me were the most radical. The protest movement took inspiration from the non-violent direct action of Mahatma Gandhi. Like Gandhi, we were after radical change.

I believed then as I believe now that change at the root of our social arrangements is necessary in order to achieve justice. The word radical comes from the word for root.

Then, burning down the house was mightily appealing to me.

But actually, it was easy. Being radical had an element of ego, and wanting to be among the cool, and having a tale to tell.

South Africa was far away. The injustice was totally unambiguous. Solidarity was important, but it didn't cause me much personal discomfort.

The song Burning Down the House came out two years after that tour, and one year after the fifth form dean of my school — we'll call him Mr Smith, because that was his name — spoke to all of us in fourth form when we had to choose our subjects for the following year — our School Certificate year and the time when many people set the course for their future working lives. He said to us that if the girls didn't want to take maths it didn't really matter because we wouldn't be needing it.

That was not injustice in far away South Africa. That was a figure of daily authority in our lives diminishing the prospects and curtailing the possibilities for about 100 14- and 15-year-old girls. And presumably he did it every year.

I was still in favour of burning down the house. I put my hand up and said something. The dean said something patronising and withering in response. I probably told some of the women teachers. But nothing appeared to come of it. Being in favour of burning down the house is not all that useful if you don't have an organising plan and a network of supporters.

As it happened, I did two more years of maths and then dropped it. In my final year of high school, I did a full arts course even though I had actually been a very good maths student. After I finished my BA, I couldn't get a job and spent time on the dole. I am not saying Mr Smith limited my life choices, but maybe he did.

So how do we achieve justice?

Many of you know that two decades after that song came out, I became a union official. We always have an organising plan.

In the winter 2017, in my role as Vice-President of the Council of Trade Unions, I attended a protest in solidarity with a group of Indian Students who were being threatened with deportation because there was a problem with their visa status. I wasn't closely involved, but the union movement has links with social change activists everywhere. That protest went pretty much unnoticed.

In early 2018, the group working to support those Indian students had contacted Chris Sullivan, a Catholic deacon and social justice activist, to see if his church could provide sanctuary for the students. Their deportation was now imminent. The plan was to invoke a centuries-old tradition of churches providing sanctuary, in order to give the students their best chance of being saved from deportation. Chris suggested they contact the Unitarian Church — his network through the Living Wage movement included our minister Clay.

They contacted Clay and [the rest is history](#).

We are a community that makes decisions together. We didn't have time in the face of imminent deportation to give the required notice in the church constitution for a special general meeting to consider the question from all sides. We didn't have long to wonder if we would be burning down the house or if we should be doing some other form of more gentle action — or no action at all.

There were members of this church who were uncomfortable about the time pressure. There were people who were uncomfortable about the prospect of supporting students who were on the wrong side of the law. If they were due for deportation, couldn't we trust that the authorities had worked all this out for us?

But among the things we knew were: the students had paid a lot of money and trusted agents in India to sort their visa status; agents marketed the student visas as a path to permanent residence in New Zealand; the schools the students attended in Auckland made money from our government and from the students themselves; the courses were of low quality; the students were the most vulnerable people in this situation.

We had leadership from Clay, who challenged us all to show our generosity, to form relationships, to understand that the principle of sanctuary was not a principle of judgment, that sanctuary was not given only to those whose innocence could be guaranteed. It was a principle of compassion and hospitality, giving people in trouble some breathing space.

For nearly a month, we provided sanctuary to the students in our church every day. At night some of us were part of a billeting crew who offered their homes to the students to sleep and eat.

Sanctuary has no legal status. The police or the immigration authorities could have come in and taken them. They would have faced TV cameras, radio microphones, and a growing community of church members and people from the community. They understood the politics of that scenario and did not enter.

In the end, just as the Springbok protest movement did not stop the 1981 tour, we did not save the students from deportation — although after some years, a few of them did get to return, when the slow, grinding legal process established that they should not have been deported.

So what did we achieve? We formed relationships with young men from India whose world had been completely separated from our own; we became known as the sanctuary church; we formed relationships with a local community who had also supported the students; we ate curry provided by members of the Auckland Sikh community; we spent more time with each other as we spent time in church daily, and not just on Sundays; we lived our principles of recognising the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and of justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

An alternative to burning down the house is to build an alternative house and an alternative community. This can be just as radical.

### **Meditation / Conversation Starter:**

- Have you ever burned down the house?
- Have you been part of building an alternative?
- What change do you want to see and how do you think we can get there?